

*... - with the Dean of
St. Peter's respects -*

THE
PLAGUE OF ATHENS,

COMPARED WITH THE

PLAGUE OF THE LEVANT,

AND THE

PLAGUE OF MILAN

IN 1630.

BY JOHN IRELAND, D.D.

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READ AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS,

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ADVERTISEMENT.

AN account of the Plague of Milan, in the year 1630, is inserted in a late interesting work from that place ; and, in the perusal of it, my attention was drawn to the following circumstance, — that the patient who had recovered from a first attack became a privileged person, and was in no danger from a renewal of the disorder.

This statement reminded me of a similar fact mentioned by Thucydides in his description of the Plague of Athens, — that the disorder never seized the same person a second time, so as to produce death.

The above coincidence led me to a more full

and circumstantial comparison of the two disorders; in the course of which I observed a few points which seemed to distinguish both these plagues, and particularly that of Athens, from the common plague of the Levant.

Such is the history of the following paper, which was submitted to the private judgment of Sir Henry Halford. He was pleased not only to express his satisfaction, but to wish that I would allow it to be read in my name at the next meeting of the Royal College of Physicians. Such a proposal was wholly unexpected; and I will confess my uneasiness at the prospect of appearing in a place with which my studies had not connected me, except by that common bond which unites and endears the learned professions to each other. But whoever is well acquainted with Sir Henry Halford must have felt how difficult it is not to be won by the delicacy of his friendship. He assured me of the kind dis-

positions of the College ; and the paper had the honour of being read by himself, at the meeting which took place on Monday, February 27. 1832.

For the thanks, which were so obligingly voted to me by the President and Members of the Royal College, immediately after the reading, I beg to offer my sincere and grateful acknowledgments.

The paper is now printed, in consequence of the private inquiries which have been made for it, and the impossibility of transcribing the copies which are desired.

THE
PLAGUE OF ATHENS.

THE Plague of Athens, as it is commonly termed, is supposed to have had its origin in Ethiopia¹; from whence it passed to Egypt and Libya, — to the dominions of the Persian king, and to several of the Grecian Islands.

Its appearance in Attica was very sudden — only a few days after the invasion of that country by the Peloponnesians, in the beginning of summer², in the year 430, B.C. The first mortality was observed in the Piræus, from whence the infection quickly spread to the upper city, or Athens itself.

¹ Ἐξ Αἰθιοπίας τῆς ὑπὲρ Αἰγύπτου. — *Thucyd. Hist.* lib. ii.

² Τοῦ θέρους ἐνθὺς ἀρχομένου.

It is remarkable, that the former part of the year¹ had been very free from diseases of other kinds; and whatever happened to exist at the moment of the appearance of the plague seemed to cease, or resolved itself into that overwhelming calamity.²

The *causes* of this disease Thucydides leaves to the explanation of others³; but in referring such enquiries to the judgment of the physician, it would be pleasing to suppose (if criticism would permit), that he alluded to Hippocrates, and that the plague had the melancholy distinction of being witnessed by both these celebrated persons; one of whom is said to have received the public thanks⁴ for his devotedness and skill in the treatment of it; while we know that the other caught the disease, recovered

¹ Τὸ ἔτος — ἄνοσον ἐς τὰς ἄλλας ἀσθενείας.

² Ἐς τοῦτο πάντα ἀπεκρίθη.

³ Λεγέτω περὶ αὐτοῦ, ὥς ἕκαστος γινώσκει, καὶ ἰατρὸς, καὶ ἰδιώτης.

⁴ Δόγμα Ἀθηναίων. — *Hippocrat. Opera. Append.* Edit. Foes. 1595.

from it, and wrote an account of it among the general transactions of the Peloponnesian war. *His* account was practical only, and confined to what he saw and experienced¹; and, as no notices had reached Athens, from the continent or the islands, concerning the nature or treatment of the disease, he described the features of it, that, in the event of its recurrence, his countrymen might be furnished with some useful information on a subject of so much importance to them.

The people, meanwhile, gave a loose to their own fancies concerning the authors of their calamities, and accused the Lacedemonians of having *poisoned* the wells of the Piræus.² And it is remarkable, that in pestilential cases in other ages and countries (as we shall presently see), the popular tendency has been to ascribe the infection to poisonous arts.

The account of Thucydides is as follows : —

¹ Ἐγὼ δὲ, οἷόν τε ἐγίγνετο, λέξω. — *Thucyd. ib.*

² Ὡς οἱ Πελοποννήσιοι φάρμακα ἐσβεβλήκοιεν ἐς τὰ φρέατα.

Persons in perfect health were suddenly attacked with feelings of violent heat in the head¹, — the eyes became red and inflamed, — the throat and tongue bloody, or of a blood colour, — and the breath infected. Sneezing and hoarseness followed. From the throat, which was much swollen within, and ulcered, the malady descended into the breast, provoking violent cough. Seizing the stomach too, it produced nausea and every sort of bilious discharge², attended with great pain. Strong hic-cough often followed, with spasms; in some cases soon terminating, in others long protracted. Amid these sufferings, the body seemed, to the external touch, to have no undue warmth, nor did it exhibit any paleness. It was rather inclined to be red or livid, and broke out into small pustules and sores.³ But the patient experienced such a burning heat

¹ Τῆς κεφαλῆς δέρμαι ἰσχυραί.

² Ἀποκαθάρσεις χολῆς πᾶσαι ὅσαι ὑπὸ ἰατρῶν ὀνομασμένοι εἰσίν.

³ Φλυκταίναις μικραῖς καὶ ἔλκεσιν ἐξηνηθός.

within, that he could neither bear the lightest ordinary clothing, nor even the finest loose covering. Mere nakedness could alone satisfy the sufferer; and the chief desire was, to plunge into cold water. Many, who were ill attended, hastened to the wells, urged by incessant and unquenchable thirst¹; nor was any relief felt, whatever quantity of water was drunk. Restlessness and want of sleep were experienced throughout the attack. Yet it was remarked, that as long as the disorder was in force, the body showed no signs of decay², but supported itself in a surprising manner in the midst of so much suffering.

After seven or nine days of the inward heats the patients mostly died, retaining still some portion of strength; but if they survived this period, and the disease descended into the belly, with great ulceration and flux of the bowels, they died for the most part of exhaus-

¹ Ἀπαύστῳ τῇ δίψῃ.

² Οὐκ ἐμαραίνετο, ἀλλ' ἀντεῖχε παρὰ δόξαν τῇ ταλαιπωρίᾳ.

tion. Thus did the disorder pursue its course through the body, beginning from the head; and if the patient escaped, after this, with the chief part of his person, the extremities still suffered other effects of the attack; for it fell finally on the *αἰδοῖα*, or on the fingers and toes, which many lost. Some, too, were deprived of their eyes; and some, when the disorder left them, had lost their memory altogether, forgetting not only their friends and families, but even their own names and persons!

One very grievous circumstance of the disorder was the dejection of the patient, when first seized with it; for, seeing so many perishing around him, he gave up all hope for himself.

This, however, was happily contrasted with his new feeling, if, by chance, he recovered. He was now in a state of safety, and inclined to pity other sufferers; for it was a remarkable feature of this disease, that, after the first

seizure, it never again affected the same person, so as to produce death.¹ The convalescent was indeed congratulated by his friends on his security, and was too prone to lend himself to the flattering notion, that not only this disease, but every other which had at first appeared to be involved in it, was now gone from him for ever !

The strangeness and virulence of the disease, however, while it raged, appeared in these circumstances also, that the birds and beasts, which usually devour the human body, either would not approach or touch the unburied corpses, or perished if they tasted them.

The fullest proof of the infection of the bodies was given by the death of the dogs that had fed on them ; and as to the birds, after a while, they disappeared altogether.

The distress in Athens itself was much increased by the numbers who were driven in

¹ Δὶς γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν, ὥστε καὶ κτείνειν, οὐκ ἐπελάμβανε.

from the country by the invaders. As there was not sufficient room for them within the houses, they were lodged in temporary huts, the more unwholesome on account of the great heats which now prevailed; and the mortality was excessive.¹ Great numbers were found on the roads, and near the fountains. The very temples were filled with the dead and the dying; for nothing sacred was any longer respected; and the common laws of sepulture were forgotten. Each buried as he could; and many committed outrages on the rights of others, either by carrying the bodies of their friends to any funeral pile which happened to be prepared, and lighting it for their own use, or by throwing them on the pile already burning, and then making their escape.

As to the treatment of the disease, it is certain that, from its novelty, the physicians knew not, *at first*, how to meet it²: — nor, in-

¹ Ἐν καλύβαις πνιγηραῖς ὥρα ἔτους.

² Οὔτε γὰρ ἰατροὶ ἤρκουν τὸ πρῶτον θεραπέοντες ἀγνοίᾳ.

deed, when applications began to be made, was any decided remedy discovered ; for that which agreed with one patient was injurious to another. It would appear, however, if credit is to be given to the Athenian Decree, that Hippocrates did, at length, succeed, and that a school of medicine was formed under him, by which the danger was abated.¹ The only thing to be regretted, on this supposition, is, that the mode of treatment is not specially recorded ; the symptoms of the disease appearing to be involved only in his general statement of the features observable in pestilential disorders.²

The gods, indeed, had been called upon for their protection. The temples were frequented, and the oracles consulted. But when it was observed, that no help was obtained from

¹ Λοιμοῦ ἴοντος ἀπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα, κατὰ τόπους ἀποστείλας, τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ μαθητὰς παρήγγειλε τίσι χρὴ θεραπαίαις χρωμένους ἀσφαλῶς διαφευξάσθαι τὸν ἐπιόντα λοιμόν.—*Hippocrat. Opera*, Ed. Foes.

² *Hippocrat. Opera*, lib. iii. sect. 7. Κατάστασις Λοιμώδης.

them¹, and that those who were the nearest in attendance on the persons of the sick were the chief sufferers, all confidence in that succour ceased at once ; — the patients were deserted by all, and left to perish as they might !

It is not to be wondered that, when the mournful eloquence employed in the description of this disease came to be familiar to the Romans, through their ambitious study of the Greek language, it should have been copied, or imitated, by their own writers. Accordingly, we find the remembrance of it, not only in their poets, though sometimes engaged in describing other cases of suffering, but in their historians, and even in those whose principal object it was to philosophise on the constitution of the world, and the influence of the heavenly bodies on the welfare of mankind.

Perhaps the most direct representation of it

¹ Ὅσα τε πρὸς ἱεροῖς ἰκέτευσαν, ἢ μαντείοις ἐχρήσαντο, πάντα ἀνωφελεῖ ἦν. — *Thucyd. ib.*

is that of Lucretius, which, indeed, is taken circumstantially from Thucydides :—

“ Principio caput incensum fervore gerebant,
Et duplices oculos subfusâ luce rubentes.
Sudabant etiam fauces, intrinsecus atræ,
Sanguine ; et ulceribus vocis via sæpta coibat ;
Atque animi interpres manabat lingua cruore,
Debilitata malis, motu gravis, aspera tactu,” &c.

Lib. vi. 1143.

Ovid appears to have incorporated a part of it in his description of the Pestilence of Egina, and makes a special mention of the infection of the fountains, already alluded to :—

“ Constat et *in fontes* vitium venisse, lacusque.”

Met. lib. vii. 533, &c.

A. Marcellinus introduces it as an illustration of the pestilence that appeared in a town invested by the Persians, during a war with the Empire.¹

And, to quote no more, there is a curious passage in Manilius, which labours to establish the doctrine of the influence of comets on the

¹ Lib. xix. cap. 4.

temperature of the air, and the constitutions of men, by an express appeal to the Plague of Athens,

“ Qualis Erethæos pestis populata Colonos
Extulit antiquas per funera pacis Athenas,
Alter in alterius labens cum colla ruebant;
Nec locus artis erat medicæ, nec vota valebant.
Cesserat officium morbis; et funera deerant
Mortibus, et lachrymæ. Lassus defecerat ignis,
Et coacervatis ardebant corpora membris:
Ac tanto quondam populo vix contigit hæres,
Talia significant gaudentes clade Cometæ.”¹

Astronomica, lib. i. 882, &c.

A review of the symptoms of this ancient plague will naturally lead to the question whether it is to be classed with the disease now commonly known as “The Plague,” or whether it is distinguished from it by circumstances which may be considered, in a greater or less degree, as suggesting an essential or characteristic difference.

¹ It is remarkable that Baxter attributes the Plague of London to “the late appearance of strange comets!”—Baxter little imagined that he was become a commentator on Manilius.

The modern plague is stated by Sir Henry Hallford as principally characterised by the following symptoms:— “ Persons ill of it are attacked with cold and shivering; with a lassitude and pain of the limbs; with loss of appetite, sickness, and sometimes vomiting; also with a pain in the head. These affections are the companions of most fevers at the beginning; but in the plague the headach is particularly severe, and there is a confusion and weight in it, and a giddiness which comes and goes. There is an uncommon prostration of strength, and a great oppression about the præcordia, accompanied with an unusual dejection of spirits. The sick are inclined to be silent; and though anxiety is strongly marked in the countenance, they make but few complaints. If these symptoms do not put an end to life in twenty-four hours, they increase in violence through the second or third day; and the progress of the disorder then shows itself in tumours of the lymphatic glands of the arm-

pits, groins, or neck, or by carbuncles which appear in various parts of the body: and these eruptions are such specific marks of the Plague, that one or other of them is almost always present, unless through the extreme malignity of the disease the patient sink before there be time for their appearance."

The symptoms here enumerated are curious and interesting in themselves. They have not much similarity, however, to those of the ancient Plague, either in their first access, their progress, or their duration, till death supervene. But there is another difference, apparently of a more positive nature. Though the instances of a second infection from the modern Plague are stated to be but few—perhaps not more than about one in two hundred—the virulence of the disorder does not appear to have been so far exhausted as to leave the patient secure of life under the relapse. At Athens, however, though some relapses took place, we know, from the express assertion of Thucydides, that

these were invariably without danger to the patient¹; nor did the whole population of Athens afford a single instance of death from a second infection of the same person.

There is another remarkable difference. In the description of the ancient disorder, there is nothing which indicates that the increase of summer heat tended, in any degree, to the abatement of it. It would rather appear from the facts above stated, that its virulence grew as the heat advanced. But it is well known that the action of the modern Plague is arrested, not only by extreme cold but by extreme heat, and that in the height of summer it ceases.

It further appears that the Athenian disease tended to produce *small pustules*² over the whole body. There is no mention of large swellings in special parts of it. But one of the distinctive properties of the modern Plague is to produce bubos, not only in the arm-pits but in the groins; and *perhaps* this

¹ See p. 7.

² See p. 4.

may be regarded as its truest feature, viz. inguinal tumour.¹

From these circumstances, without mentioning others, it may perhaps be concluded that the Plague of Athens had more resemblance to the pestilential fevers which have been experienced in several parts of modern Europe than to the common Plague.

In an early part of the same century which witnessed the Plague of London, a disease also called Plague (Peste) had appeared in different parts of Italy. It seems, indeed, to have shown itself at intervals, from the year 1576 to nearly the close of the seventeenth century; and from Naples, to which, at that time, it had extended, the infection *probably* was carried to the Mediterranean coast of France, and produced what is known by the name of the "Plague of Marseilles," about the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The seat of the disease appears to have been

¹ Βουβών — Inguen.

Lombardy, and the place where it chiefly raged was Milan.

Of course, the accounts of such a disaster can form but a small part of the general history of Italy. It is fortunate, however, that particular notices of it are contained in the memoirs of certain contemporary writers, and the public acts of the municipality of Milan, during the progress of the disorder which desolated that city in the year 1630.

These local authorities have been produced in a late popular work from Milan¹, in which they are interwoven with the fabric of the tale itself; and a sufficient reference has been, for the first time, made to them, to inform us of the general features of the disease, and to direct us to the quarter from which a more ample intelligence may be obtained.²

The principal historian of this Plague is stated

¹ *I Promessi Sposi*.

² “ Per far conòscere un tratto di Storia Patria più famoso che conosciuto.” — Vol. iii. cap. 31.

to have been the Canon Ripamonti, who bore the office of “chronologist” of Milan at that time, and has left a Latin treatise in five books, “De Peste quæ fuit anno 1630.”

That the character of this disease resembled that of 1576 is proved by a remarkable fact, that a very old physician (Settala), who, in his early days had witnessed the first disorder, lived to join in the medical treatment of the second! — He also took the infection, and recovered.

The disease is said to have been introduced by a German army, which over-ran the Milanese in the autumn of 1629. Into the city itself it appears to have been brought by an Italian soldier (then in the service of Spain), who had obtained the clothes of some dead Germans, and carried them to a house within the walls. He first exhibited the infection in his own person. A large swelling (bubbone) was discovered in one of his arm-pits¹, and in four days he died.

¹ “Sotto un’ ascella.” — Ib.

From this event the sickness spread, and became general in the spring of the following year, first seizing the poor inhabitants (the more exposed to it from a previous year of scarcity), and finally making its way to the rich.

The following are stated as the symptoms of the disease.

Persons in perfect health were attacked with it, and not unfrequently death was quite sudden¹; — in most cases, however, it took place after some days, but with appearance of great suffering. The symptoms generally attending the disorder were spasms and palpitations.² Lethargy or delirium came on, and the body was marked with livid spots and bubos. There was also a feeling of internal heat, a reddening of the face, and a glare of the

¹ “Morti per lo più celeri, violente, non di rado repentine, senza alcun precedente indizio di malattia.”—Cap. 31, 32, &c.

² “Spasimi, palpitazioni, letargo, delirio, lividori, bubboni.”—Ib.

eyes¹, with an impatience of the usual clothing of the body.

If, however, the patient recovered, he was regarded as in a state of security from a subsequent attack of the same disease. A second infection² was indeed a prodigy, rather than a rarity. He became, therefore, a sort of privileged person³, and entered without fear on a benevolent attendance upon the sick, or on the medical treatment of them. Of this, not only the old physician already mentioned, but the Padre Felice, were examples. The latter, who had courageously superintended the lazaretto, caught the plague⁴, recovered from it, and afterwards resumed his employment, while most

¹ “Arsura interna — la faccia accesa — gli occhi lustri.” — Ib.

² “Aver due volte la Peste era caso piuttosto prodigioso che raro.” — Ib.

³ “I pochi guariti della Peste erano in mezzo al resto della popolazione, come una classe privilegiata.” — Ib.

⁴ “Contrasse in sul principio la Peste; ne guarì, et riprese con nuova alacrità, le cure di prima. I suoi confratelli vi lasciarono, la più parte, e tutti gioiosamente, la vita.” — Ib.

of the members of his order contentedly lost their lives on the spot.

In the review of this disorder there are circumstances which remind us alternately of each of the Plagues before described.

The excessive rarity of a second attack from it,—approaching to almost a total exemption,—and the real freedom from all danger, if it ever occurred, — carry us back without hesitation to the Plague of Athens. With this also concur the inward burnings of the sufferer, and his impatience of clothing; while the bubos are more decidedly the feature of the modern Plague.

Yet it still deserves to be enquired, whether the bubo of the arm-pit — the only species here mentioned — be a perfect specimen of that plague; or whether (if any reliance is to be placed on the grammatical meaning of the term) the “Inguinal Tumour” be not its more sure and characteristic mark.

Meanwhile, there is a peculiar circumstance

which exhibits the people of Milan and the people of Athens labouring under the same common delusion. Both parties ascribed their sufferings to poisonous practices¹, the only difference being in the objects to which the poison was applied. In the present instance, the Plague was supposed to have been spread by contagious unguents applied to the doors and walls of the houses. In fact, there were such appearances, however they might have been produced; and Ripamonti is quoted as expressly saying that he went to see the spots, which are thus described:—

“ Maculæ erant sparsim, inæqualiterque
 “ manantes, veluti si quis haustam spongiâ
 “ saniem adpersisset impressissetve parieti:
 “ et Januæ passim, ostiaque ædium eâdem
 “ adspergine contaminata cernebantur.” — Ib.
 Indeed, no reasoning could persuade the people

¹ “ Arti venefiche, gente congiurata a spargere la Peste per via di veleni contagiosi.”—“ Cose tali erano state supposte e credute in molte altre Pestilenze.” — Ib.

that they were not suffering from the malignant agency of poisoners ; and so strong was the ascendancy of this notion, that not only common friends, but members of the same family, and even husbands and wives, grew to be suspicious of each other. Nay, the very sick, in the wanderings of their mind, accused themselves of having conveyed poison to others ; and confessed these imaginary enormities to the attendant priests ! At length the municipality itself is quoted as expressing the same persuasion in its public edicts ; and many supposed poisoners were taken up and executed !

Whether the Plague of Marseilles had any of these features so marked as to establish its derivation from that of Milan, would well deserve the enquiry of some more skilful person. An account of that disease was prepared by M. Bertrand, a physician of Marseilles, at the time of the calamity. The well-known letter of the Bishop, which is quoted in the Biographical Dictionary, does not enter into any

medical view of the disease, but is mostly confined to his own agency, and that of his clergy, towards the suffering inhabitants. The mention of this subject, however, suggests one consideration of peculiar interest.

Thucydides has strongly described the growing profligacy of the population of Athens, as the disease advanced ; and it has been already observed, that as soon as it was found that the first application made to the gods was of no avail, all confidence in them was cast away. Having been worshipped mostly for present good, and being found helpless against the prevailing calamity, they soon became the scorn of all.¹ When it was seen, too, that no present punishment was to be apprehended from the laws, since judges, and witnesses, and the injured parties, were all perishing, together with the offenders themselves, every restraint was

¹ This universal feature of idolatry is explained at large in the Dean of Westminster's Lectures to the King's Scholars.
— *Paganism and Christianity compared.*

removed, and evil had its free course. Life was now regarded as but ephemeral¹; and the only desire was to enjoy whatever portion of it remained, before the arrival of the last and fated moment.² The property of the wealthy being also seen to drop suddenly into the hands of those who before were possessed of nothing, a strong and general cupidity arose, of seizing whatever unlawful profit could, by any means, be obtained, though but for a moment; and licentiousness and plunder³ were insanely indulged in the very expectation of death itself!

Compared with this dreadful picture, how beneficent, how courageous is the spirit of Christianity, displayed in the other cases which have been noticed! In the earlier Plague of Milan, so ardent and devoted had been the religious services of the great Borromeo, that

¹ Ἐφήμερα τὰ τε σώματα καὶ τὰ χρήματα ὁμοίως ἡγούμενοι.
— Lib. 2.

² Ἦν πρὶν ἐμπεσεῖν, εἰκὸς εἶναι τοῦ Βίου τὸ ἀπολαῦσαι. — Ib.

³ Ἡδὺ — κερδαλέον. — Ib.

the disease came to be historically known by the name of him who had so signally relieved it; and the “Plague of San Carlo¹” sufficiently marked that of 1576, as if it had carried with it the glory of some conquest or discovery. Such is the force of Charity!

In the Plague of 1630, the younger Borromeo (Frederick) never withdrew himself from the infection. Wherever the sick lay, he and his clergy were also found. Great numbers of them perished amid their zealous services. The rest continued their beneficent labours; and the rites of religion were never intermitted, while the afflicted called for the last consolation of their miseries.

It is well known that a similar resolution was displayed in France. The portraits of the “Good Bishop” of Marseilles, administering to the wants of his suffering flock, are still

¹ Fu chiamata, ed è tuttavia, “La Peste di San Carlo.” — Come una conquista, o una scoperta. — Tanto è forte la Carità. — Ib.

venerated through Europe; and the same sacred admiration follows, and unites, the names of M. de Belzunce, and the Borromean Cardinals.

The religious contrast, exhibited by these subjects, is complete. Heathenism madly exclaims, "Let us eat and drink; *for* to-morrow we die." Revelation teaches us to rely on the Providence of God, under all circumstances; and the believer can steadily repeat, "My soul waiteth always on the Lord;" — "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him;" — "For I know, that if this earthly tabernacle be dissolved, I have a building of God, eternal, in the heavens."

THE END.

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